

**Guidance for Coping with Civil Disturbance**  
**Behavioral Health Strike Team**  
**Washington State Department of Health**

A **peaceful protest**, also known as **nonviolent resistance** or **nonviolent action**, is the act of expressing disapproval through a statement or action without the use of violence. [Protests are a constitutional right](#) and have been used to advocate for a number of different causes, including human rights issues, anti-war campaigns, and expressing disapproval of various governmental policy issues. Some general in-person methods include boycotting certain products, participating in a march or a sit-in, displaying a particular symbol, and handing out flyers.<sup>i,ii</sup>

In the United States, Civil Disturbance is defined as, “acts of violence and disorder prejudicial to the public law and order. It includes acts such as riots, acts of violence, insurrections, unlawful obstructions or assemblages, or other disorders prejudicial to public law and order. It also includes all domestic conditions requiring or likely to require the use of federal armed forces.”<sup>iii</sup>

## **Purpose**

This document is for the purpose of describing the behavioral health impacts of Peaceful Protests and Civil Disturbance and suggesting ways to increase safety of those participating in protests, as well as organizations which might be targeted, and reduce the behavioral health impact.

## **Key Findings**

Behavioral health outcomes following collective actions such as protests, riots, and revolutions may be similar to those following natural disasters, terror attacks, or armed conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

Protests, even those that are nonviolent, can be associated with negative behavioral health outcomes.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Behavioral health impacts have been seen in protestors as well as in non-protesting citizens.<sup>5</sup>

## **Common Behavioral Health Impacts Include the Following:**

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders**

Incidence of PTSD ranged from 4%<sup>6</sup> to 41%<sup>7</sup> in riot-affected areas.

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i <https://study.com/academy/lesson/peaceful-protest-definition-examples.html>

ii <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/protesters-rights>

iii <https://definitions.uslegal.com/c/civil-disturbance/>

## Anxiety

Anxiety disorder rates immediately following the event of up to 10.2% of population.<sup>2,3,8</sup>

Anxiety disorders rising to 47.4% two months following the event.<sup>3</sup>

Children near protest sites are also impacted, with 34%<sup>9</sup> to 55%<sup>10</sup> showing symptoms of anxiety.

Nearly half of protesters also exhibited anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

## Major Depression

Rates of depression increased for citizens impacted by the protests as well as protesters.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

There is suggestion among earlier researchers that collective actions may have reduced depression and suicide for some subpopulations, possibly due to collective release of negative feelings and building greater social connection in the community.<sup>13,14</sup>

## **Risk factors for Increased Behavioral Health Impacts**

- Gender, with women being more impacted<sup>10</sup>
- Lower SES<sup>8,10</sup>
- Exposure to violence, looting, destruction of property, and physical injury<sup>7</sup>
- Interpersonal conflicts<sup>4,8</sup>
- Media and social media exposure<sup>3,15,16</sup>
- Lower ability to cope, and less social support<sup>3,4</sup>
- Those closest in proximity to the epicenter of the events<sup>11</sup>

## **For Public Health, Healthcare and Other Organizations Located Near Ongoing Protests or Violent Response, and Those Who Anticipate Their Organization May Be the Target of Protests:**<sup>17</sup>

- Operate your incident command teams to centralize preparedness and response activities.
- Consider closing/locking all but essential entrances/exits. Consider security/door attendants at other entrance or exit points.
- Ask vendors to use alternative entrances as needed.
- 'Buddy' system for staff leaving: the facility, parking lots, transit points, etc.
- Ask/keep staff until their relief arrives on shift.
- Consider feeding and sleeping staff overnight if it is unsafe for them to travel home.
- If staff arrives in the evening, consider asking them to arrive earlier in case of road closures, protests, etc.
- For healthcare facilities, such as hospitals close to protests, consider rapid emergency care services outside of normal space and staff for injuries related to projectiles, chemical or pepper spray exposure, etc.

- For acute care hospitals, regularly patrol ambulance bays, emergency department entrances, discharge locations, parking lots, etc. for any safety issues and impediments to patients arriving or leaving.
- For discharging inpatients, consider both rapid-discharge protocols and a potential earlier cut-off time for discharging patients.
- Provide staff with additional opportunities to check in with external family and friends.
- Inspect external facility grounds to remove objects that could be used as weapons such as landscaping rocks or stones, chairs or benches, signage, etc.
- Deploy external lighting unless the equipment can be possibly used as weapons.
- Consider moving staff who are near external-facing windows closer to the facility's inner core.
- Consider accessing company support such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to help with staff stress.

### **Personal Protection in Times of Civil Disturbance:**

#### **Protesting**

If you choose to participate in a protest or other collective or group action, the following should be considered:

- Weigh factors of personal and emotional safety
- Plan for the possibility of violence in terms of tear gas, rubber bullets, and physical assault. Plan for and take precautions in case of injury.
- Develop a plan for evacuation from the protest site if the situation becomes dangerous.
- [Know what to do if you are stopped by police.](#)<sup>iv</sup>

#### **Preparing and Protecting Your Home and Family:**

- If you are in a neighborhood which appears to be at risk for violence, gather supplies needed if you are required to shelter in place.
- Gather what you will need should you be required to evacuate your home. Remember important documents such as tax, mortgage, banking, and other records.
- Take photos of items in your home for insurance purposes.
- Gather community support. Reach out to neighbors and develop communication and support plans.

#### **Protect From Emotional Impact:**

- Reduce exposure to media and social media.
- Reach out to friends and family members to maintain connection, share information, and support each other.
- Have conversations with children at a developmentally appropriate level. Explain what is happening and reassure them you will keep them safe.
- Maintain a schedule of eating, sleeping, and daily routine if possible.

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<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/bustcard\\_eng\\_20100630.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/bustcard_eng_20100630.pdf)

- Pay attention to signs that you are experiencing increased anxiety or depression, and reach out to your healthcare provider for assistance.

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